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C O N F I D E N T I A L KUALA LUMPUR 001659

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STATE FOR EAP/MTS AND PRM -- EILEEN SEN

E.O. 12958: DECL: 11/26/2017  
TAGS: [PREF](#) [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PHUM](#) [PINS](#) [MY](#)  
SUBJECT: UNHCR WARY OF NEW ROLE FOR "RELA" AUXILIARIES IN  
DETENTION CENTERS

REF: KUALA LUMPUR 1362 - UNHCR BRIEF ON REFUGEE

#### SITUATION

Classified By: Classified By: Political Section Chief Mark Clark for reasons 1.4 (b and d).

11. (C) United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) Representative in Malaysia Volker Turk briefed Ambassador Keith on November 23 regarding UNHCR operations in Malaysia, and UNHCR's central role in U.S. resettlement processing for Burmese refugees. Turk expressed his concern with the Malaysian Government's reported decision to delegate the staffing of 14 immigration detention facilities to the People's Volunteer Corps (RELA), a government-sponsored public security auxiliary force under the Ministry of Home Affairs. According to press reports, RELA's role at the detention centers would last up to two years, providing the Immigration Department time to recruit and train additional staff. UNHCR, NGOs, and refugees continue to report that largely untrained and poorly supervised RELA volunteers commit abuses against refugees, considered illegal migrants under Malaysian law, in the course of raids against undocumented aliens. Volker worried that further abuses may occur if RELA exercises responsibility over the detention centers. Turk offered that reform of Malaysia's immigration policy and training of RELA members by Malaysia's Human Rights Commission, SUHAKAM, may mitigate the occurrences of abuses and targeting of refugees. Turk also suggested that the UN Human Rights Council's new Universal Periodic Review, with Malaysia scheduled for 2009, may provide an opportunity to promote incremental reform given that the GOM is often very sensitive to criticism that it is acting outside of UN norms.

12. (C) Ambassador Keith informed Turk that he would take the opportunity in his early calls on the Malaysian government (GOM), after presentation of credentials, to express U.S. concerns over GOM policies that impact refugees and U.S. resettlement efforts. The Ambassador expressed support for advancing the idea of immigration reform with the GOM, while recognizing the wide-ranging sensitivities this issue represents for the GOM. Ambassador Keith agreed with Turk that seeking a pragmatic solution with the GOM might provide the best results, and he reaffirmed USG support for the UNHCR in Malaysia and for UNHCR's essential role in U.S. resettlement efforts.

13. (C) Comment: The GOM is resistant to relaxing any of its formal policies regarding refugees for fear of creating uncontrollable pull-factors into Malaysia. In addition, the government is largely unable to address refugees issues separate from wider concerns over the possibility of unchecked migration. Reference to international expectations

and UN standards, possibly including the new UNHCR review process, provides some leverage we can use to influence the GOM's behavior toward refugees. The Ambassador and Embassy officers, in coordination with UNHCR, will raise our concerns over RELA's new role at immigration detention centers in upcoming meetings with Malaysian officials. We also are working with missions from other resettlement nations, including Norway, Sweden, New Zealand and the Netherlands, to coordinate our messages and approach to the GOM on refugee protection. We will include the topic of RELA in this multilateral effort.

KEITH